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Evaluating Sustainable Practices of Bangladeshi Apparel and Textile Industry: Triple Bottom Line Approach

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Bangladesh is the world's second largest apparel exporter by volume. Its low labor cost and high productivity make it an attractive sourcing destination. Industry experts predict by 2021, it will service 5% of total global apparel trade, contributing an additional \$50 billion of revenue to the country (Rab, & Hoque, 2017). With 82% of Bangladesh's foreign income coming from the apparel and textile business, the government has invested in infrastructure to support the 4,500 garment manufacturers and 1,500 textile processing units which employ more than 4 million workers (Alam, Selvanathan, & Selvanathan, 2017; Rab, & Hoque, 2017).

Despite government efforts to promote the industry, incidents such as the Rana Plaza Collapse, and the Tajreen Fashion fire brought the country under intense criticism and surveillance with regard to corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Rab, & Hoque, 2017). Bangladesh recently lost the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) facility, a trade program designed by the USA to promote economic growth in developing countries by providing preferential duty-free entry for up to 4,800 products from 129 designated beneficiary countries. Further, the European Union (EU) warned that if working conditions and compliance is not maintained, the country will lose its preferential treatment in the EU. (Rab, & Hoque, 2017). The Bangladeshi government responded to these by enacting new laws and regulations regarding environmental and social sustainability (Alam, Selvanathan, & Selvanathan, 2017; Rab, & Hoque, 2017). The future growth and welfare of Bangladesh and its workforce is dependent on its manufacturers adopting and practicing socially responsible and sustainable practices.

To evaluate the current state of social and environment practices among Bangladesh apparel and textile manufactures, a mixed methods study was conducted with industry professionals using Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory as an underpinning. Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory suggests, in order to achieve long term sustainability, an organization should care for its economic, social, and environmental performances simultaneously (Svensson et al., 2016). Professionals currently working in the apparel manufacturing industry in Bangladesh were contacted via email and Facebook messenger to participate in an anonymous online survey. Inclusion criteria included the manufacturer be 100 percent export oriented and provide at least one of the following value-adding steps: (1) production of fabric (knit or woven), (2) production of apparel (knit or woven), (3) Owning a brand or (4) Production of yarn. A 42 question survey collected information concerning demographics, financial, social, and environmental

performance measures within the participants' facilities. An open ended essay length response question gathered information regarding impediments to the implementation of sustainable initiatives. Quantitative data were analyzed for descriptive and correlational statistics with SPSS software, and the open ended question was coded for themes using constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants included 122 professionals, 30% Manager, 32% Senior Executive, 24% Executive, with the remainder employed in supervisory positions. Fifty-eight useable surveys were obtained (47% return rate). Fourth-eight percent of respondents work in the woven sector, 63% from knit and 25% from both sectors. Thirty-six percent of the respondents were involved in the fabric manufacturing process, 41% in garments making, 33% in coloring and chemical processing, and 35% in garments washing. Sixty-seven percent of participants work for companies that sell their products to Europe, 60% sell items to the USA, with Australia and Japan accounting for a small percentage of exports.

Results indicate Bangladeshi manufacturers are addressing economic, environmental and social sustainability, with 85% of the industry reported maintaining ISO or equivalent standards in their manufacturing process. Seventy-eight percent of participants reported their factories are audited regularly for social and environmental issues. Economic concerns were found to be a first priority for each sector of the industry, whereas environmental and social priority varied based on the nature of the industry. In the fabric manufacturing and spinning sector, equal attention was found to be given to economic, social, and environmental concern. In the coloration and chemical processing sector, priority is being given to environmental consequences, whereas in garment construction, the focus is on social concerns. Participants frequently mentioned impediments to implement social and environmental sustainability, including financial burden, political unrest, resource scarcity, lack of knowledge, lower prices of the products due to buyers' negotiations and competitive market, lack of willingness from the authority due to higher profit inclination, and lack of government caretaking.

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